

12 MAR 1970

Criticism of Brezhnev and Kosygin reported

Evidence gathered of conflict within Kremlin leadership

By Eric Bourne
Special correspondent of
The Christian Science Monitor

Belgrade

Is there conflict within the Soviet leadership involving both Party Chief Leonid I. Brezhnev and Premier Alexei N. Kosygin?

There have been many rumors in the past year, especially about Mr. Brezhnev, but no one has been able to penetrate Soviet official secrecy to discover precisely what the current internal Kremlin situation is.

But several recent developments have renewed speculations. The latest—reaching this writer from a high Communist level in an East-bloc capital—suggests more forcibly than anything previously that there are critics inside the Soviet party's 11-member Politburo

who now are seriously questioning the top leaders' handling of major economic problems.

According to this information, three members of the Politburo have addressed a strong letter to the Central Committee which is critical of both Messrs. Brezhnev and Kosygin.

The signatories are said to be Alexander N. Shelepin head of the Soviet Trade Unions, Kirill T. Mazurov, deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers, and Mikhail A. Suslov, the most long-standing member of the Politburo.

If such a challenge does indeed exist, it is somewhat reminiscent of the background of crucial murmurings preceding the downfall of Nikita S. Khrushchev.

The report must be regarded with

some caution, though it would not be inconsistent with the present Soviet scene. Furthermore it comes from a Communist source moving, until recently in the highest levels of his party and still likely to have contacts with those in a position to know.

News of the letter's existence emerges on the eve of another expected Soviet Central Committee plenum due soon to debate one of the most endemic problems of the Soviet economy—agriculture.

In their letter to the Central Committee the three are said to have expressed strong criticism of Messrs. Brezhnev and Kosygin precisely in this field, as well as in other aspects of economic policy. This is the fourth year of Soviet reforms which all too clearly are not

producing the results sought when launched.

Not long ago Mr. Brezhnev himself initiated a searing attack on the shortcomings in Soviet life, scoring bureaucracy and maladministration at all levels.

Recently the Soviet press has carried frequent reports on the difficulties of supplying even the most elementary of consumer needs, especially in the provinces.

In some regions, shortages of such basics as matches and salt have been instanced. More remote districts frequently lack gasoline or soap. A specialist encountered here who recently worked in a Soviet provincial town said that almost throughout his stay soda water was unavailable.

Soviet press reports have disclosed not only the extent of these consumer problems but how far short generally the economic reform has fallen behind one of its major aims—the overall improvement of the economic network linking enterprises, wholesale distribution, and the consumers.